

**Michał Lubina**

Jagiellonian University (Poland)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3342-1763>

e-mail: [michal.lubina@uj.edu.pl](mailto:michal.lubina@uj.edu.pl)

## A Lioness Turned into a Fox.

### A Political Realist View of Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi

**Abstract:** For long Aung San Suu Kyi has been considered a global hero. After 2012, however, that deification has given way to condemnation. Suu Kyi was a hero; a hero who after 2012 betrayed the alleged values. The reason of this radical change of perception is the fact that until 2012 Suu Kyi had been considered a personification of idealism in politics and for “betraying” these values she has been criticized since then. This article claims that both mentioned discourses on Suu Kyi miss the point and are being built on wrong assumptions. Contrary to popular belief Suu Kyi has always been a politician; more: a realist politician. Therefore, the aspects that should be questioned are not whether is she a good or bad one or whether she turned away from the people or even whether she has changed or not, etc. The question is, whether she is a skillful politician – she must be judged by the ethic of responsibility. Suu Kyi's tactics evolved according with changing political circumstances – she combined two archetypes of political behavior: that of a “lion”, or rather “lioness” and that of a “fox”. That itself shows one thing: Suu Kyi possesses prudence, the ultimate political value.

**Keywords:** *Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma, Myanmar, individuals in politics, political realism*

*(A Prince) ought to choose the fox and the lion; because the lion cannot defend himself against snares and the fox cannot defend himself against wolves. Therefore, it is necessary to be a fox to discover the snares and a lion to terrify the wolves.*

Niccolo Machiavelli, “The Prince” (Machiavelli, 1532/2006)

There is a huge disappointment over Aung San Suu Kyi in the West. Within just few years Suu Kyi experienced a spectacular degradation in the eyes of most of the Western world. She was downgraded from a celestial position to that of a “shrewd” politician. This article claims that the both mentioned narratives miss the point because they are being built on wrong

assumptions. This article focuses on concrete aspects of her career to prove that her steps in politics since the very beginning have been rational, realistic moves to increase her political possibilities. Suu Kyi's tactics evolved according with the changing political circumstances: she consciously transformed from Machiavellian role of a "lion" to that of a "fox".

### **The Prelude: Courting the Regime**

When Suu Kyi entered politics in 1988 she had only her surname with her. Suu Kyi is the daughter of the Burmese hero and "father of modern Burma", general Aung San (though she is probably more influenced by her mother, Khin Kyi, Zöllner, Ebbighausen, 2018). Suu Kyi's parentage gave her not only the "moral capital" (Kane, 2001, pp. 147–171), but in the eyes of the most of the people of Burma made her the legitimate heir to the leadership (Harrihan, 2012, pp. 210–211). In Burmese conditions that was well enough, but insufficient as there are many children of great leaders who are unable to follow up their parents' steps and it was still too little to balance the dominance of the army. Being in power from 1962 to 2016 *Tatmadaw*, or the Burmese armed forces, have virtually consumed the country. For six decades these military men had a total control over the economy and politics.

The mass protests in 1988, however, have significantly weakened the position of the army. Particularly the formal resignation of General Ne Win, the strongman and dictator, on July 23, produced a new dynamic. Contrary to popular belief that Suu Kyi joined the opposing students, she entered politics wisely. Her first political action was a letter sent to the military regime where she proposed mediations between the regime and protesters (ASSK, 1991, pp. 191–197). Later, when protesting students approached her, she turned them down (Popham, 2011, p. 48). Hence, she tried to enter politics as a mediator. Unfortunately, the army's side showed disinterest in her proposal and even strongly advised her not to go to politics. Only then did Suu Kyi chose to side with the opposition. Even then, however, she was still caution. Before her first speech, she asked general Ne Win for his approval on her planned first public speech which was granted (Ibid., p. 51). She was equally cautious during her most famous Shwedagon speech – the one which gave her recognition – when she expressed warm words for the army (ASSK, 1991, pp. 192–199). She understood that her success depended not only on popular support but also on army's stance. If she was able to sway the army to her side, or at least divide it, then her chances would have improved. Unfortunately, this proved impossible and her successive speeches and interviews between August, 15 1988 and September, 13 1988 (ASSK, 1991, pp. 191–208), with growing criticism towards the army and its commanders – show her understanding of decreasing chances of achieving that goal.

Suu Kyi's and other opposition leaders' tactics then in August/September 1988 was escalation of demands – first referendum, then elections and finally interim government – by joining the bandwagon to mass popular protests that continued to paralyze Rangoon and

other Burmese cities. This ended in failure when army staged another coup in September, 18 1988, but behind-the-scene negotiations with the regime continued to the last moment – “for her and her colleagues (...) the military crackdown had come out a clear blue sky”. A spokesman for Tin Oo (another opposition leader) commented: “this is coup d’état by another name, this ruins everything” (Popham, 2011, p. 74). This relation indirectly proves that there were options for brokering political deal between opposition and the army but it never materialized. Even after the bloody coup of September, 18 Suu Kyi kept behaving politically. Her initial move was a request to the military junta for dialogue, which never materialized (Wintle, 2007, p. 284). Although she failed in this attempt, the very fact that she, just a few days after a bloody massacre, sent this letter is symptomatic. Only after being ignored, she criticized the coup and army’s killings in her letters to foreign government and international organizations (ASSK, 1991, p. 208). By doing so she changed the tactics from courting the regime into a more assertive one.

## Part I: The Lioness

Once Suu Kyi realized that the regime was not willing deal with her, she decided to pressure them to give in, at least a little. If she was not able to negotiate with the regime, she had to exert pressure. This is how her “lioness” tactics was born. She knew she must be brave to face the generals but at the same time she needed to be smart. That’s why she chose the tactics wisely: non-violence.

Given the very little move to maneuver her party had in the military controlled Myanmar, non-violence was probably the best choice. It was certainly a pragmatic move, not axiological – naturally, it gave her moral advantage, or *awza* in local conditions (itself a political quantity, though something one cannot simply measure or evaluate). What is more important, however, is that if Suu Kyi had called for mass protests or started uprising, then – given the lack of arms – her movement would have been quelled.

By non-violence Suu Kyi not only undermined “legitimacy and disparaging of the power of the army government” (Taylor, 2011, p. 408) but also had enhance her profile, both in Myanmar and outside the country. This is how she earned her *awza*. Being afraid of nothing, one time walked straight into the line of soldiers that were pointing their guns at her. She won: the soldiers did not kill her and the incident made her famous, both home and abroad. Domestic and international recognition, combined with her parentage, helped her to survive – otherwise the generals probably would have marginalized her, or perhaps even eliminate her. Although ultimately Suu Kyi was not able to achieve her goals by non-violent tactics, she has built her recognition.

Suu Kyi’s uncompromising stance was a part of the “lioness” tactics. For two decades (1988-late – 2000s) the regime wanted to break her at all costs. “Anything goes”, that was its policy. She was constantly defamed in regime’s media. Her supporters were repressed and maltreated. Her colleagues were bribed and threatened. Her family was separated. Finally,

she was not allowed to see her dying husband. Suu Kyi withstood all. She sacrificed her family and coped with betrayals of her closest colleagues. She was able to “defend herself against snares”.

### ***Balancing the Generals: Local Support....***

Being a “lioness”, however, meant not only to be brave. It also meant to find the ways to balance regime’s dominance and unwillingness to talks. Aside from non-violent tactics, Suu Kyi did this via twin assets: local and foreign support. Otherwise doomed to marginalization, with this kind of aid she was able to remain in the game until 2010. Those two assets are interconnected with each other – popular support in Burma made her recognizable in the West, her glorification in the West in turn increased her popularity in Burma – and strengthened one another, at least until 2012.

As said earlier, Suu Kyi entered politics with the advantage of her name. Since very beginning she used this tramp card of parentage and she continues to use it until now. What she needed, however, was to prove that 1) she is not only her father’s daughter and has her own agenda, and 2) to bridge continuity between him and her, a one that would justify her actions. She did it with her Shwedagon speech in August 1988 where she presented herself as “forced” to enter politics by critical political circumstances and called the anti-regime protests “second struggle for national independence” (ASSK, 1991, p. 193). That was “a spurious analogy between the foreign rule of the British and the rule of the Tatmadaw” (Taylor, 2011, p. 404) but the people bought her interpretation. Thanks to that she undermined the legitimization of the military government and positioned herself as the “proper” heir to the throne – she earned her *awza*.

Her second great ability was winning the ordinary people. She placed great value in personal contacts with the people in Rangoon and outside the capital during mass rallies. She toured the country many times (1988–1989, 2003, 2012) and thanks to that she knew what the social attitudes were and what people needed. Taking the example of her father she used his PR and behaved like a Western politician – she talked to everybody, responded to letters and greetings, knowing that this is the best way to gain popularity. While touring the country and during weekly speeches at the front of her house at University Avenue 54 in Rangoon (1995–1996), she hypnotized the crowds by her charisma, rhetoric skills and ability to communicate. She understood her nation: while speaking, she stressed her affection to her father, emphasized discipline and fairness, condemned factionalism and militarism, gave advices on everyday issues, praised democracy and human rights, evoked Buddhist teachings and comforted the audience with phrases like: “All things change eventually, even the government of Burma” (Pederson, 2015, p. 190). Thanks to all of that she became enormously popular and challenged “not only the military regime but also the commonly accepted patterns of deference” (Taylor, 2011, p. 412). By waking up (or rebelling) the society she enhanced her own political profile, she built her *awza*.

A friction of this tactics was her reach to the ethnic minorities. During electoral campaign in 1989 she toured the neglected ethnic regions of Burma. Her most important gesture was to wear ethnic clothes in public rallies. She won their hearts: this gesture meant more than hundred words. But that was a gesture only – privately she was complaining about “feeling silly about all the fancy dress she was expected to wear” (Popham, 2011, p. 111), admitted that she had little knowledge on ethnic minorities (Clements, 2008, p. 197), and when asked about concrete actions for them, she declared: “democracy first and then I’ll consider your demands” (Levy, 2002). Finally, the last reason for domestic admiration was the house arrest. Politically speaking being locked for 15 years helped her. She could not make any error as everyone does sooner or later in politics. The Burmese admired her, loved her and deified her. Suu Kyi’s absolute unique political position resulting from this made all attempts to marginalize her ineffective and counterproductive. This was how being a “lioness” was politically profitable.

#### .... *And Foreign Backing*

The other most important Suu Kyi’s asset has been foreign backing. She was given *Nobel Peace Prize* and a countless other awards and prizes. This happened thanks to a lucky combination of geopolitical and ideological factors, media’s popularity and Suu Kyi’s personal skills.

Unfairly convicted for her ideas, with dramatic family background, she was perceived as one of the last romantic figures in politics: “all the ingredients were there: a secretive and ruthless tropical dictatorship; a beautiful wife (of a respected Oxford academic) under house arrest (...) by their own cack-handedness, the generals had turned their most effective opponent into a cover girl” (Wintle, 2007, p. 330). Her fight with the military regime “became in most people’s minds the Beauty and the Beast – a courageous woman against one of the world’s most brutal dictatorships. The battle lines could not be clearer, the divisions more precise” (Lintner, 2011, p. 74). As a result, political struggle in Burma became inseparably linked with Suu Kyi who dominated the picture: “for the outside world there was really only one story in Burma (...) the story of Aung San Suu Kyi and her struggle against the ruling generals” (Thant Myint-U, 2007, p. 332). Consequently, Suu Kyi has become an icon, an epitome of the universal battle of good and evil (Zöllner, 2012, p. 334). This was possible thanks to untiring actions of “Burma lobby”, consisting of tens, if not hundreds, of NGOs – human rightists, charitable and dissident, etc., who idealized Suu Kyi (Wintle, 2007, p. 355). Her fame went well beyond Burma and beyond politics – it became a hallmark (Zöllner, 2012, pp. 281–282).

Although most international recognition came to her without her contribution – she was locked in the house arrest while the West deified her – without her skills that would not have materialized. She knew how to speak with media and with Western politicians and how to win their hearts and minds. This helped her to build her position as an intermedi-

ary between the Western world and Burma. As a result, for almost the next two decades mainstream Western coverage from Burma reflected her views. She became a dimension in Western countries' foreign policies. But she knew how to use of it. She used all this support to advocate introducing sanctions against Burma. She wanted generals to make concessions, having South African example in mind. Unfortunately, the government fed itself, unabatedly trading with Asian neighbors. Although there is a living debate over the impact of sanctions on Myanmar and its society, sanctions certainly helped Suu Kyi to politically stay on board. Without sanctions and without foreign admiration she would more likely be marginalized.

### *Neutralizing Hostile Propaganda*

Popular support and foreign back were Suu Kyi's two twin assets. This is precisely why the generals had been trying to undermine both. This in turn forced Suu Kyi to neutralize army's hostile propaganda.

Although army tried to diminish Suu Kyi's popularity both at home and abroad, the military PR actions towards foreigners were incompetent, self-defeating or even grotesque – see e.g. making several-hours length press conferences that reminded military briefings (*BCP's Conspiracy...*), sponsoring American journalist Barbara Victor trip Burma in hope that she would write against Suu Kyi (she wrote her hagiography instead), deliberately separating Suu Kyi from her family (and thus boosting sympathy towards her in the West) or publishing book under bombastic title “the Conspiracy of Treasonous Minions Within Myanmar Naing-Ngang and Traitorous Cohorts Abroad” (1989) – all those actions contributed to junta's absolute PR defeat.

That is why only propaganda aimed at Burmese mattered in the struggle for power. Here regime had tried to present Suu Kyi as an alien person who threatens national unity. Propaganda's overall message portrayed Suu Kyi as a “foreigner” (“Western princess”), foreign agent (“Trojan horse”), a communist, a dishonored daughter of Aung San, national traitor, neocolonial puppet and – in an openly racist manner – as racial renegade (Burma Press Summary, 1987–1996). In short, military propaganda had tried to present her as non-Burmese.

Suu Kyi had to neutralize it. Externally, her respond was to start dressing in Burmese clothes (when she entered politics in 1988 initially she wore Western style dress) and – following the dying out Burmese tradition – beginning to put flowers in her hair (her first pictures from 1988 show her without it, Zöllner, 2012, p. 303). More dangerous, however, were regime accusations that she is non-Buddhist. As Buddhism remains the dominant religion (its impact on society, culture and politics cannot be underestimated, it provides idioms to Burmese politics and is the source of the conceptual framework within which most Buddhists in think about politics), Walton, 2012, pp. 1–2), these kinds of accusations were potentially threatening for Suu Kyi's popularity, especially given the fact that the generals

started being very religious in public after 1992. Being structurally disadvantaged (without sources to finance new pagodas or support the clergy), Suu Kyi needed to counter this threat. Thus, she successfully presented herself as a better Buddhist than the generals. She spoke about compassion, love, integrity, loving-kindness, refrained from criticizing the regime (Clements, 2008, pp. 48–189) frequently mentioned meditation that helped her to survive house arrest, became devout in public (ASSK, 1996, pp. 159–163), and financed four other monasteries in Rangoon (Houtman, 1999, p. 294). Intellectually she combined Buddhism with democracy, human rights and positioned her opposition movement within the context of Buddhist political thought. She began to use ancient Buddhist concepts and practices such as *byama-so taya* (meditation) or *metta* (loving-kindness, Lintner, 2011, p. 96). This tactic helped her struggle and led “to a personality cult” (Houtman, 1999, p. 282). As a result, Suu Kyi started becoming “a female bodhisattva that the people believe is going to deliver them from evil (...) she is being perceived as somebody divine and sacred, a person who is much more than an ordinary human” (Lintner, 2011, p. 97). Suu Kyi, therefore, not only defended herself against accusations of being non-Buddhist, but in the course of her struggle with the generals she even increased her popularity and profile.

Army’s most serious blow was hit below the belt: at her marriage. Politically speaking (and only politically, since this article does not indent do deliberate on her personal life) her marriage with an Englishman was a weak point given not only strong dislike for mixed marriages in Burma but also the fact that Britain had colonized Burma and Suu Kyi’s father fought with the British. Although her husband, Tibetan scholar Dr. Michael Aris had little in common with Kipling-style imperial Englishman, for political struggle in Burma it was irrelevant: in politics innocence dies first. That is why Suu Kyi since the beginning of her political career has tried to neutralize the negative political impact of her marriage. She has repeated many times in public that Burma is more important for her than her family and she has hidden his husband behind her back. When in Burma in 1988 and 1989 Michael Aris dressed in Burmese sarong, *longyi*, rarely spoke and did not tour the country with her during electoral campaign (Bradley, 1995). Later, during her house arrest, she didn’t allow him to stay in her house in order to prevent junta’s PR machinations (Victor, 1999, p. 101). Upon her release from house arrest in 1995, attacks on him intensified in the military press, so Suu Kyi distanced herself from him in her interviews (Clements, 2008, p. 141) and forbade him to talk with the journalists (Bradley, 1995). Besides that, she often minimized personal costs by presenting it as non-important in comparison with suffering of the ordinary Burmese under military regime. Finally, when it turned out that her husband is dying of cancer in England she decided not to farewell him but to stay in Burma fearing that once she leaves the country junta would not allow her to return.

It must have had enormous personal costs. From a purely political perspective, this was a sacrifice of the marriage at the altar of the political cause. Suu Kyi in the eyes of the majority of the Burmese society has proved that she indeed has always put her country ahead of her family. That gave her a priceless, rarely-seen feature in politics: reliability. This in turned



made all the attempts of the military propaganda irrelevant. In general, Suu Kyi was really successful in countering and neutralizing military's propaganda – which the victorious 2015 election results have best proven.

### *Keeping the Party Line*

Suu Kyi proved to be a skillful politician as well in another aspect of politics: in party intrigues. She was able to dominate her party, NLD and until now she maintains nearly total dominance over it. It's a big achievement, given the cultural background ("the decision every ambitious Burmese must make is not whether to betray his leader, but when", Wintle, 2007, p. 77), the fact that she started almost from scratch, she had strong rival personalities to deal with and the military regime did everything to divide the opposition.

When National League for Democracy (NLD) was founded in September 1988, Suu Kyi was the person number 3, a secretary general. Soon, however, she distanced her rivals in popularity, particularly Aung Gyi, the first NLD chairman. That situation produced not only rivalry between them but also a power struggle that culminated in Aung Gyi's expulsion from the party after stormy meeting in December 1989 – Suu Kyi proved her skills in party intrigues for the first time (Popham, 2011, p. 115). This show of strength helped a lot: seeing her popularity and skills other leaders, such as Tin Oo, yielded and accepted her single leadership. Since then Suu Kyi ruled alone, though most of the time without nominal leadership. Nobody was able to challenge her leadership successfully. She has held down the unity of NLD with an authoritarian grip.

There were, however, serious challenges along the way. In mid 1990s a group of party members rebelled against Suu Kyi's sanctions policy. Knowing that they have hidden support within the party Suu Kyi handled this issue effectively. She proposed a draft of a resolution that all decision on behalf of NLD should be made by herself. She forced party members to vote openly. Majority feared opposing her: the voting was won and the rebellion was quelled (Mitton, 1999).

Next challenged was more serious and much more personal. Ma Thanegi her former secretary, became disillusioned with Suu Kyi in mid 1990s due to Suu Kyi's stand on sanction and started criticizing Suu Kyi in Western media (Ma Thanegi, 1998). This was a serious issue – Ma Thanegi was posing a threat to Suu Kyi's dominant position in the Western coverage on Burma. It is unclear what Ma Thanegi's motive where (Popham, 2011, p. 320). Whatever the reasons, Ma Thanegi lost this duel with Suu Kyi: was blamed a traitor of democracy's case and blank into political oblivion.

Much more serious – and even more painful – was emergence of an opposition from U Kyi Maung – one of the party's elders and, along with Tin Oo, Suu Kyi's closest comrade in arms (Levi, 2002). U Kyi Maung, however, in late 1997 has started objecting Suu Kyi's sanctions policy (though contrary to Ma Thanegi he did not do it openly). What happened within NLD's leadership circle in December 1997 remains a mystery; regime's media reported



on divisions within the party and NLD released announcement that U Kyi Maung “made a break” in his party activity (*Burma says...*, 1997). This “break” has never stopped – U Kyi Maung withdrew to his private life and kept the secret; he died in 2004 without telling anybody any details.

Two years later, in 1999 Suu Kyi faced another split. 27 NLD members openly called for dialogue with the regime. Suu Kyi decided to punish them in an exemplary way: expelled them from the party (Levi, 2002).

The last party rebellion came in 2010 when the regime organized new, non-free elections. NLD faced dilemma: whether to come to terms with reality and take part in these elections (and bury the hopes for recognition of victorious 1990 elections) or keep on fighting and boycott the new elections. Suu Kyi, who was under house arrest decided the latter was right and made her decision clear. There was, however, no unity within party lines – a group of members under the leadership of Khin Maung Swe preferred to take part in the elections and that was probably the hidden agenda of most of NLD members (Ba Kaung, 2010). Realizing that, Suu Kyi forced her party members to vote by acclamation (not by secret vote) and again nobody dared to challenge her (Zöllner, 2012, p. 474). Khin Maung Swe left the party and soon became marginalized.

This is how Suu Kyi has achieved an almost absolute control over her party and maintains it until now – nobody hides this fact, even her party’s spokesman (Fuller, 2015). Suu Kyi has politically made NLD a mere appendix to her in the best Soviet style. To paraphrase Vladimir Mayakovsky: “when we say Suu Kyi, we mean party, when we say party, we mean Suu Kyi”.

## **Part II. The Fox**

A skillful politician needs to be a lion and a fox. Most of the time between 1988 and 2010 the regime was unwilling to negotiate with Suu Kyi. This forced her to employ the “lion” tactics which she modified to local conditions (non-violence) and politically survived the continuous attempt to marginalize her. Nevertheless, throughout this period Suu Kyi many times embarked on behind-the-scene negotiations with the regime – it happened in 1994, 2000–2002 (talks brokered by the UN) and 2003–2004. Although all those attempts ended up in a failure, the very fact that Suu Kyi was ready to negotiate shows that she could have changed her tactics to that of the fox should the conditions were different. The regime, however, was uninterested so she remained a lioness.

In late 2010, however, the realities changed. The regime implemented its civilianization process than led to reformist Thein Sein’s presidency and liberalization from mid-2011 (Ye Htut, 2019). For Suu Kyi the new realities meant an uneasy choice: keep her “moral icon” position, respected but politically irrelevant, or playing a risky game on (post)generals’ terms with diminishing foreign backing. Being a real politician, she chose the latter; and employed the fox tactics.

Instead of further balancing and challenging the regime, Suu Kyi conceded. She switched from confronting the regime to cooperating with it, embarked on behind-the-scene negotiations with the army and tried to convince generals to her person. By doing so she compromised a lot: accepted donations from army cronies (Montlake, 2013), publicly proclaimed “love” for the army (Owen, 2013), participated in military parades and did not backed social fight for the land grabbed by the military (and by the Chinese-owned company, Aung Zaw, 2013). She sat pat during the offensive against the Kachins (Hindstrom, 2013), refused to back the student protesters and did not say a word in support of the Rohingyas (she never used that word). For the latter she has been heavily criticized in the West. Human rights activists that passionately supported her for two decades still cannot get over this kind of attitude, accusing her of betrayal. But given Myanmar’s socio-political conditions (general hatred for them) her silence on Rohingya issue has been politically wise, though internationally costly. Realistically speaking she has little to gain and much to lose – if she had backed them, she could have as well bid farewell to her career.

Although the generals, contrary to the initial promises, did not change the constitution and did not allow Suu Kyi to become president, she did not give up. She used her trump cards (popular support and foreign backing) yet again to enforce constitutional amendments on the regime.

### ***Pressuring Amendments: From Home...***

Suu Kyi’s party, NLD, joined hands with 88 Student Generation leaders and established a joint committee (Win Htain, Nyan Win, Ohn Kyaing, Win Myint, Han Thar Myint, Tun Tun Hein from NLD and Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi, Mya Aye, Jimmy and Pyone Cho from 88 Generation), which collected signatures from citizens (Yen Saning, 2014). This was accompanied by campaign of public rallies in support of amendments. Suu Kyi was very critical, she used phrases such as: “those who say the Constitution does not need to be amended, and that the country is on a path to democracy, are cheating the people” (Zarni Mann, 2014); “The Tatmadaw shouldn’t have more or less rights than other citizens” (*Suu Kyi says...*, 2014); “I’d like to ask the military, are you really happy that the constitution has given you privileges that other people do not have? You should think seriously about this. I hate to say it, but your guns are the source of your military strength. I understand that your guns give you the upper hand. But does this make you more dignified - or less?” (Kuhn, 2014); “I challenge the military. Soldiers must be brave enough to face reality. The military was founded as the Burma Liberation Army, not as the Army for Repressing Burma” (Min Zin, 2014). But that was too little to scare the generals. They replied by warning Suu Kyi via electoral commission (“do not challenge the army”, Lawi Weng, 2014) and via lawyers (“do not cause public disorder”, San Yamin Aung, 2014), and by conceding to pseudo-concessions, such as parliamentary commission and roundtable talks. Suu Kyi did not give up and even threatened to boycott the 2015 elections (Shibani, 2013), but to no avail. On June 25<sup>th</sup> 2015,

the NLD lost the voting over amendments in the parliament. NLD needed 75% of the total MPs, or 498 of 664 members to amend the constitution. On the crucial day, with 583 MPs present (including all 166 military MPs), 50 absent and 31 vacant seats, NLD fell short of majority. For amending Article 57f, 371 MPs voted “yes” (58%) and 212 “no”; the amendment of Article 436 got 388 votes in favor (61%) and 195 against; NLD lost votes for 3 other minor amendments, winning only a small, language correction in article 57d. It turned out that Aung San Suu Kyi’s popular support fell short, when trying to amend the constitution.

### *... and Abroad (Poland’s Case Study)*

Support from abroad did not help, either. At the same time when Suu Kyi tried to force the regime to concessions by rallies at home, she lobbied for the West’s pressure. She went to Singapore, Poland, Hungary, Czechia, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, UK, Italy and Australia to ask for international help in enforcing constitutional amendments.

Her trip to Poland on September 11–12, 2013, may be an illustrative case study of these tactics and their outcomes<sup>1</sup>. Suu Kyi was quite outspoken in her criticism of the regime, during her public lecture (“we have a civilian government in the sense that the people, who are in the government are no longer in uniforms, but the great majority of them are retired army officers and the great majority of them served in the previous military government, Suu Kyi, 2013). She especially did so in the closed-door and backstairs meetings with Polish politicians. Suu Kyi often confessed: “We need to emphasize that it is still not democratic yet”; “I appeal: do not be under illusions. We are a long way ahead and the result is unknown”; “they are no longer in uniforms, but they continue to salute one another; it is the same army”; “They ruined the country, but they think the sanctions did it”; “if they have a choice of either reforming the country, but quit, or stay in power and keep ruining it, I don’t know what they would choose”; “decentralization means one thing for them: previously all decisions were made by the president. Now some decisions are delegated to vice presidents, who won’t decide on anything without (the) president’s consent”; “they understand transparency as an attack”; “we should not praise them for what they have done: they did a good thing, but it is not enough, now it is time to do the next step”. “You need to watch their moves”; “Thein Sein is in no hurry to amend the constitution; he never said a word about it: nothing indicates that they will amend the constitution”. However, if asked what the NLD would do if the generals wouldn’t amend the constitution, Suu Kyi replied: “in that case we will stand in the elections anyway, but it will complicate our situation”. This indeed they did, proving their calls for a boycott were bluffs from the very beginning.

The Polish politicians hosting her stay and Suu Kyi were not a match made in heaven. The contrast could not have been greater between cosmopolitan Suu Kyi and Polish politicians,

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<sup>1</sup> I was present during some of these meetings, both the formal and informal talks. All quotes in this subchapter come from these meetings.

who were disinterested in Asian affairs. Both active and veteran dignitaries viewed Asia as too far away to matter. The “Solidarity” leader and Nobel Prize Winner Lech Wałęsa, who after a few years did not even remember meeting Suu Kyi, expressed his *désintéressement* by saying: “Burma is far away” (*Interview with Lech Wałęsa*, 2019). One of the top Polish dignitaries, a previous dissident and political prisoner, welcomed Suu Kyi expressing joy over Burma having become a democracy once again, to which Suu Kyi instantly replied “Burma is not a democratic country”, bringing the politician down a notch. Unperturbed, the dissident-turned-dignitary asked “what are you going to do with this grotesque Naypyidaw once you come to power?” to what Suu Kyi fired back with barely concealed sarcasm: “there are only two things we can do with it. Either turn it into Las Vegas or into Hollywood”. When Suu Kyi painted a not-so-rosy picture of the political situation in Myanmar, the Polish politician, trying to sympathize with her, said “That is why I don’t like the generals” to what Suu Kyi undiplomatically replied “I am a general’s daughter. Since my childhood I felt strong attachment to the army. I can tell the good generals from bad ones”. Aung San Suu Kyi later shared concerns over the ex-military parliamentarians, that: “they do not see the difference between ‘relinquish power’ and ‘share the power’”. This is so typical for authoritarian regimes. That is why dictators are dictators: they don’t trust anybody but themselves”. Afterward, when she presented her view of Tatmadaw’s reluctance to transfer power, the Polish politician expressed slight reservations (“we are entering the field of psychology now”). Suu Kyi was quick to put the dignitary in line, stating: “psychology is everything. It decides about how the power is exercised”.

Nevertheless, Suu Kyi was the support-seeker, not her hosts. She came to ask, if not to plead, to help her cause by extracting international pressure on Thein Sein and other ex-generals. She achieved little. The Polish politicians’ unwillingness to support her other than morally came not only from their disinterest in Asian affairs. Then, in the West, Myanmar was an example of successful democratic transition and Suu Kyi’s complaints were considered as little relevant. Politically Myanmar represented much needed good news, compared to the otherwise depressing authoritarian turn in the Middle East (the failed Arab Spring; Turkey) and in Southeast Asia (Thailand, soon to be followed by the Philippines). Min Zin understood the mood by summarizing, “under such conditions, it is hard to imagine that the international community will wholeheartedly throw its weight behind the unpredictable Lady” (Min Zin, 2014). Let alone that she remained silent on the Rohingya issue. So, (half-hearted) foreign backing fell short, when trying to amend the constitution, too.

### *The Decisive Elections*

Despite being unable to amend the constitution, Suu Kyi did not push the limits of her political space too far. She set herself the ultimate goal of winning 2015 elections come what may. That is why she put all her cards on the parliamentary elections in November 2015. It was a risky and brave decision given the fact that she was steadily losing her support and

her victory was not sure, and that she had no guarantee that the generals would not falsify or nullify the elections. Moreover, by taking part in the partly-free elections she accepted that 25% seats in the parliament are nominated to the army (the amount that enables blocking amending the constitution) and that the military will hold three key ministers in any government (Constitution, 2008). And that – given the 25% reserved to the military – she must have scored 67% of the voters to get majority and balance army's structural dominance. That was a risky game: in the worst case, Suu Kyi might have ended up without anything – neither power nor domestic and international prestige which she had sacrificed by dealing with the regime. She put all her cards on the elections.

That proved to be the right decision. Suu Kyi's NLD won overwhelmingly by scoring 79% of the voters and gaining absolute majority. She was right in believing that the end justifies the means – it was worth to make all those concessions to win the elections and rule Myanmar after 27 years of political struggle. Suu Kyi's victory proved that in politics those win who can wait. Her fox tactics paved her way to the victory.

It was her fox tactics, too, that secured her ascendance to power. In November and December 2015 Suu Kyi has embarked on a series on behind-the-scene talks with top military commanders, such as Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of Tatmadaw and Senior General Than Shwe, the former dictator who kept Suu Kyi under house arrest and conducted a failed attempt to her life in 2003. In other words, Suu Kyi was willing to talks with her former foes (*Former Myanmar...*, 2015). Although the details are unknown, it is very probable that Suu Kyi persuaded the regime to give back the power in return for economic benefits and – probably – security guarantees for military apparatus, including the regime leaders and their property. In Myanmar circumstances that meant keeping the privileged position of the armed forces and military-backed “crony capitalists” (Reuters, 2012) that control the economy. What Suu Kyi did was very wise. In Myanmar circumstances any attempt to politically reckon with the military threatens resumption of repressions, withholding the reforms or even new coup d'état. By guaranteeing military safe landing Suu Kyi secured the fruits of her victory and made it possible for Myanmar to move forward. And she finally has been recognized by the military commanders – “the military no longer see Suu Kyi (...) as a formidable threat to their institution, and view her as containable (...) as a pragmatic leader” (*Army to Rebrand...*, 2016).

### *A Disappointing Governance*

All Suu Kyi's successful political maneuvering, however, proved to be in partial or full vain. Once in power, Suu Kyi did not score well. Internationally it was the Rohingya crisis (2017) that drew the biggest criticism, but domestically slowed economic growth or inability to secure “new Panglong” agreement with ethnic minorities proved to be more criticized failures. After three Suu Kyi's government has few successes (limited ones in reforming education, healthcare and fighting corruption), many failures (Rohingya crisis, reconciliation with other

ethnic minorities, economic development) and much failed hopes in its balance sheet. In short, after three years in power, Suu Kyi's government is clearly a disappointment. The NLD inherited serious structural problems from the army, but these problems notwithstanding, this cabinet does not seem to be able to govern successfully. Although Suu Kyi is still able to maintain her celestial position of an icon that levitates high and offers hope to the people - she escaped criticism at home - but the country's problems lay unresolved. There is no vision, no plan and, the worse of all, no competence to tackle the multidimensional problems facing Myanmar (Lubina, 2018). Thus, unfortunately, the same Suu Kyi who proved to be a skillful politician in ascending the power, does not seem to be a successful administrator.

## Summary

Aung San Suu Kyi throughout her long and full of sacrifices career has proven to be a realist politician who successfully employed two archetypical tactics - first that of a lion and second that of fox. She used it in accordance with the changing circumstances which forced her to modify her stance. When she entered politics in 1988 the military regime was unwilling to negotiate with her. Therefore, she needed to behave like "a lion to terrify the wolfs". Thanks to her bravery she gained popularity and recognition; her skillful use of two main assets - popular support and foreign backing - made it impossible for the regime to marginalize her. Her lioness tactics came with a high personal cost: Suu Kyi must have undergone what Isaiah Berlin described as policy makers' "agonizing choices in public and in private life (for the two cannot, it is obvious, be genuinely kept distinct)" (Berlin, 1998); nevertheless, her sacrifice of family for the country has built her unquestioned reliability within Burmese society and neutralized all the attempts to diminish her popularity. She has proven to be very efficient keeping the party line, too. Although she initially has stood against traditional mechanisms of Burmese politics, such as personality cults or sacralization of power, she owed her position to exactly those mechanisms. And she knew how to make good use of it - she made NLD a mere appendix to her personal career and maintains almost a full control on the party until now.

When political situation deteriorated for her in 2010, Suu Kyi followed the Bismarckian idea that "the politics is the art of the possible". She risked all her legend for a hazardous game with the generals on their terms. She transformed to a fox in order to "discover the snares". She escaped all the traps, put all her cards on the elections in 2015 and won. And after that she secured the victory by guaranteeing military soft landing. Her actions in late 2015 were consistent with Burmese political culture: this kind of behind-the-scene deals is precisely how politics has always been made in Myanmar (it is a local equivalent of the cabinet diplomacy). Thus, Suu Kyi has made a long way from questioning the traditional mechanisms of Burmese politics to using them - the latter gave her power. Unfortunately, once in power, she proved to be ill-successful in governing the country. Suu Kyi's government (so far) is much less successful in reforming Myanmar than its predecessors, Thein Sein's



cabinet (naturally, if considered all the army's rule from 1958, then NLD is not that bad). Thus, Suu Kyi has proven herself an uncomfortable political truth: the same qualities that allow surviving in opposition not always guarantee success in government.

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